VISIT…

Rebranding Sanskrit
An occidental perspective

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Introduction

There are several common beliefs about Sanskrit prevalent today. Many of these are only half true, and some are simply wrong.

To look at a few of them:

Myth: Sanskrit is ancient language which is now all but obsolete and thus of little relevance.

In fact, Sanskrit is a contemporary, living language as well as an ancient one.

Sanskrit is alive

Sanskrit is not a dead language (unlike Latin and Greek which are no longer spoken).

- Sanskrit is still spoken by an estimated 50,000 (as of the 1991 census) in India alone. For some, it is their mother tongue.
- Spoken Sanskrit is taught in countries from the US to Japan. King's College London are just about to start a Spoken Sanskrit evening class.
- Samskrita Bharati has taught 1,000s of people to speak Sanskrit, and has trained over 70,000 teachers
- New Sanskrit words are being created for modern inventions: a video is 'chitra-mudra'; a visa is 'pravesha-anumati'

Myth: Sanskrit is simply the religious language of Brahminical Hinduism.

This is an important aspect, but Sanskrit is much more than just the Vedas and temple chants.

Sanskrit as a language need not be affiliated to any religion.

Sanskrit is not just Hindu

Sanskrit is closely associated with Hinduism for historical reasons and even today it is most visible in connection with the Hindu religion, but:

- The language is used in all kinds of contexts: a Kashmiri pandit talking to a Karnatakan scholar, a daily news bulletin, and a household everyday language as well as temple stotras.
- Religious Sanskrit texts form just one part of the corpus – there are political texts (Arthashastra), poetry (Meghadutam), discourses on medicine and science and much more

Myth: Sanskrit is essentially Indian, and of no interest to anyone outside India.

Sanskrit is of course a vital part of Indian cultural heritage, but, just as the influence of Greek and Latin has spread far beyond their country of origins, it has universal appeal.

Sanskrit is global

Sanskrit has travelled all over the world, not just in India:

- Several of the world's top universities offer Sanskrit degrees, including Harvard and Oxford
- The Japanese syllabary system is thought to have evolved from the Siddham script (used for Sanskrit at the time)
- Sanskrit dictionaries and textbooks are published in langauges from Hebrew to Russian to Portugese
- Earlier this year, a Chinese scholar, Ji Xianlin, was awarded a Padma Bhushan for his contributions to the study and dissemination of Sanskrit.
- In St James' schools in London, children are taught Sanskrit from the age of 4 ½.
- A European ENT specialist came to Bangalore to learn Sanskrit in order to access certain useful medical texts

Sanskrit's image

In India, Sanskrit is being sidelined as a language only of instruction and religion, and branded exclusively Hindu.

In particular, the promotion of Sanskrit as a contemporary language is often seen as part of a Hindu right wing conspiracy.

Recent remarks by Professor Stella Sandahl of the University of Toronto illustrate this common misperception:

"It is very sad to see how the ignorant Hindutva forces demean and make the wonderful classical language into something trivial and ridiculous. How do we stop them? How can we rescue Sanskrit from these vandals? I doubt that the student (of modern spoken Sanskrit) can read and understand even one line by Kalidasa or Bana or Jayadeva. But he can cut the throat of those who cannot speak his so called Sanskrit. When he is not busy demolishing mosques and raping nuns."

Sanskrit's obscurity

Sanskrit literature suffers not from an image problem but from a lack of visibility.

Many are unaware of Sanskrit's literary wealth, not to mention the huge amount of writing on everything from agriculture to mathematics, from philosophy to medicine – much of which the other speakers here will be discussing over the next two days.

I will focus on the literary texts (fiction) in particular.

Rebranding Sanskrit

We need to reconsider the perception of Sanskrit in India, and adapt its image for today's MTV generation.

In order to popularise Sanskrit in India, it needs to be seen as relevant and interesting, and open to all, Muslims, scheduled castes and non-Indians as well as Brahmins.

Exporting Sanskrit

The Western world has shown itself receptive to the Sanskrit language and literature - when introduced to it - since it was first ‘discovered’ by colonial scholars.

However, most people outside India are barely aware that the language and its literature exist. Once India has given birth to this new rebranded Sanskrit avatar, it should be promoted abroad.

For now, though, the focus should be on burnishing Sanskrit’s faded image in India.

Section Two

The Sanskrit language

Why is Sanskrit still relevant?

Sir **William Jones**, speaking to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta (now Kolkata) on February 2, 1786, said:

"The **Sanskrit** language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists."

Its linguistic interest

Since Jones' discovery that Sanskrit is a sister language of Latin and Greek (via Indo-European) and thus indirectly related to English and other European languages, Sanskrit has become an important part of the study of philology.

English and other European languages reflect this indirect relationship, eg:

- stha/staanam – sto – stehen – stand, steady, stool
- bhratr – brother
- dvara - door

Its logic

Sanskrit grammar is famously logical (and difficult). The language's logic and lack of ambiguity led a NASA researcher, Nick Briggs, to write a paper in 1985 explaining why it would be ideal for knowledge representation with articifical intelligence – ie: it could programme a robot. Since then, much has been discussed and written on Sanskrit as a language of computers and machines.

Its beauty

- Where most languages settle for one basic word to describe a tree or river, Sanskrit uses thousands of synonyms. For instance, a selection of words beginning with ‘a’ that mean the sun:
  - Aditya
  - Abjahasta (holding a lotus in his hand)
  - Akaajapathika (sky traveller)
  - Ambaaramani (jewel of the sky)

- Often a basic noun is referred to by its epithet (although this is often for metrical reasons)

Jalada/dhumayoni (smoke-created)= cloud

Shatapada /gandalubdha = bee

Bhubhrt/acala= mountain

Imagery:

गच्छन् स वारीण्यकिरत्पयोधेः
कूलिस्थितांस्थानि तरुनधुन्वन्
पुष्पास्तरांस्ते ऽण्गसुखानतन्वांस्तन्
किन्नरा मन्मथिनो ऽध्यतिष्टन्

(Hanuman) scattered the waters of the ocean as he went
The waters shook the trees which stood upon the shore
The trees spread flesh-delighting beds of flowers
And Kinnaras, Manmatha-maddened, seated themselves upon them.

Verse 23, Canto X
Bhatti-Kaavya

Its versatility and malleability

Sanskrit is incredibly versatile:

- There are several different ways to say even basic sentences such as ‘bring the cow’:
  - Bring the cow!
  - Do the cow-bringing!
  - Let the cow be brought.
  - The cow ought to be brought.
  - Let the bringing of the cow be done.
  - The cow-bringing ought to be done.

- Trick verses

बभौ मरुत्वान् विकृतः समुद्रो
बभौ मरुत्वान् विकृतः समुद्रः
बभौ मरुत्वान् विकृतः समुद्रो
बभौ मरुत्वान् विकृतः समुद्रः

Marut's son who had accomplished various tasks and who possessed the means of cognition (crest jewel) shone

The excited lord of the gods accompanied by divine damsels became radiant

The ocean which, wind-struck, had crossed its boundaries, appeared grand

Full of joy, the wind whose speed was reduced, seemed attractive.

- Sanskrit mahakavya verse is notoriously complex and difficult to translate. But Sanskrit can be incredibly simple.
- Sanskrit was used for everything from royal decrees to philosophical debates to technical treatises.
- The language is incredibly malleable – an entire sentence can be expressed in a word, and poets played on the fact that word order doesn’t affect the sense.

Section 3

The influence of Sanskrit literature across place and time

Sanskrit literature

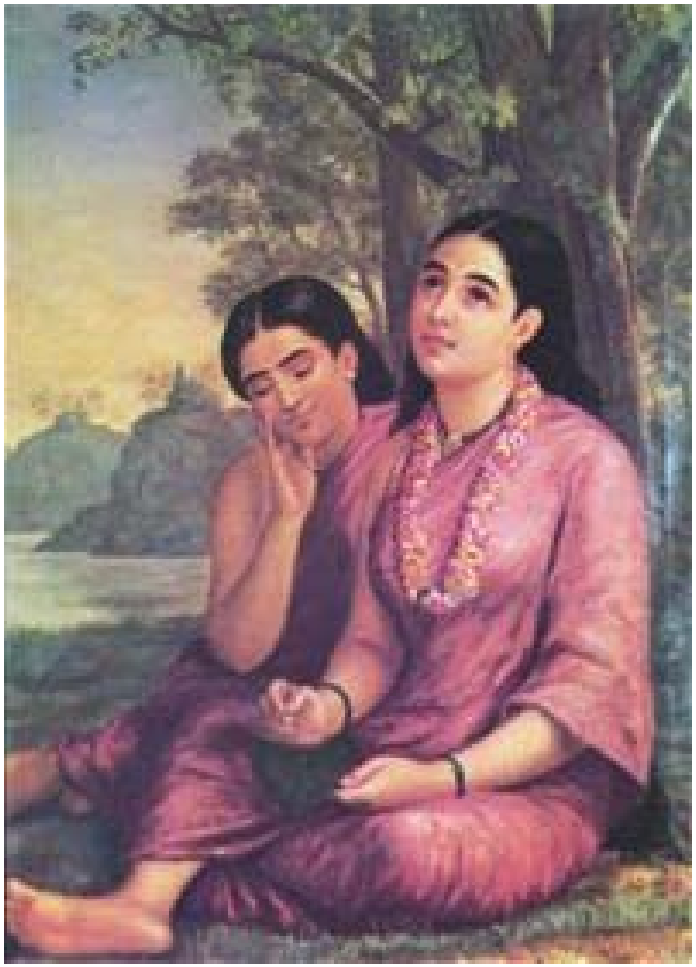
Sanskrit writers, of which there were many, were often prolix. There is a multitude of literary texts, many of which have not yet been translated. Indeed there may be several which have not yet been discovered.

These texts deserve far greater recognition and influence than they currently enjoy. When given a chance, they tend to be popular and often inspire great works of art as the following section indicates.

Early influence: in India

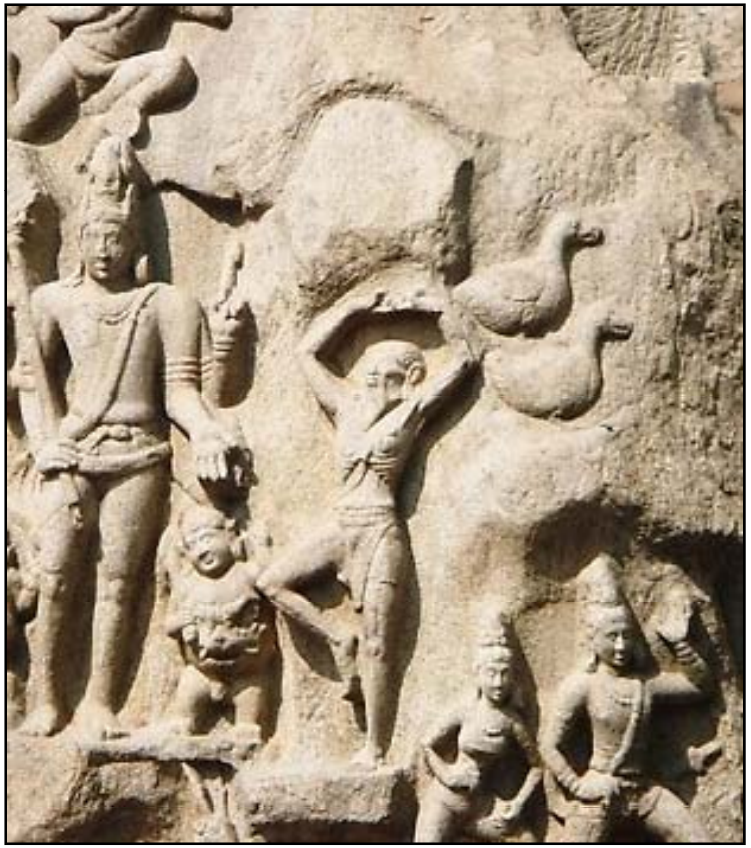
In pre-modern times, these Sanskrit plays, poems, epics, novels and stories gave rise to hundreds of interpretations and reimaginings.

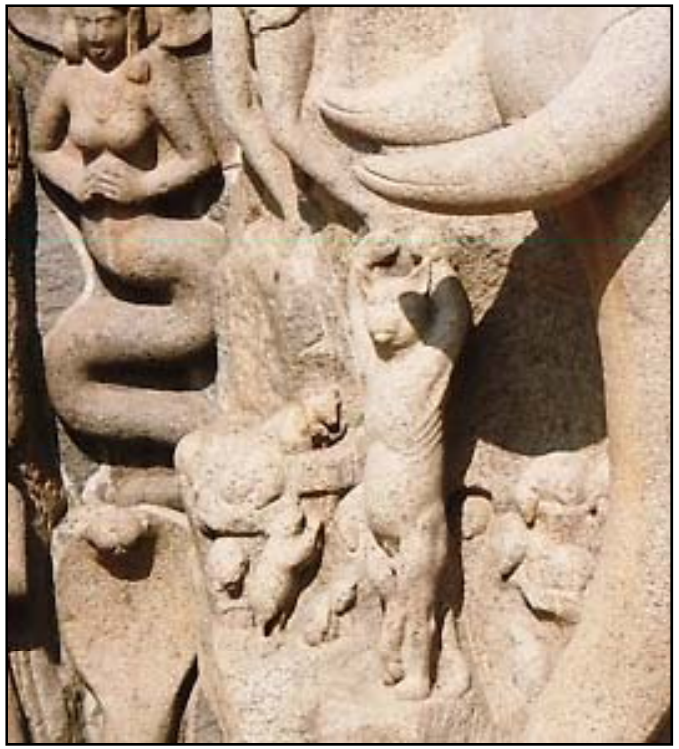
Eg: Ramayana of Valmiki spawned all manner of Ramayans, from the Hindi one of Tulsidas, to the Tamil Kambaramayan.



Raja Ravi Verma’s Shakuntala

Mahabalipuram: Arjuna’s Penance





And the cat…

Early influence: abroad

Some texts, such as the Kathaasaritsagara, spread further afield – influencing (most probably) both the Arabian Nights of the Middle East and Grimm's Fairy Tales.

The story of the crocodile and the monkey (from the Jataka) appears in a medieval Japanese collection of stories

The distance these stories travelled in an era before the invention of the printing press and postal system, let alone our modern tools of communication, is testament to their popularity.

Influence today

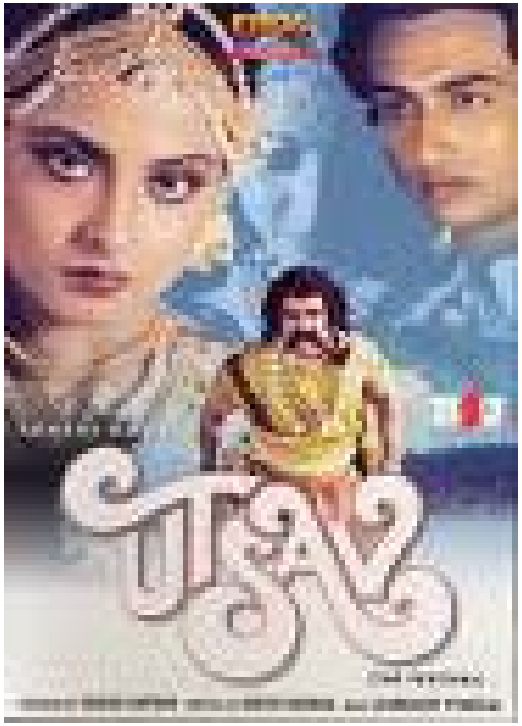
These same texts have proved themselves just popular across centuries as continents.

There are artists of all types all over the world working with this material.

Locally:

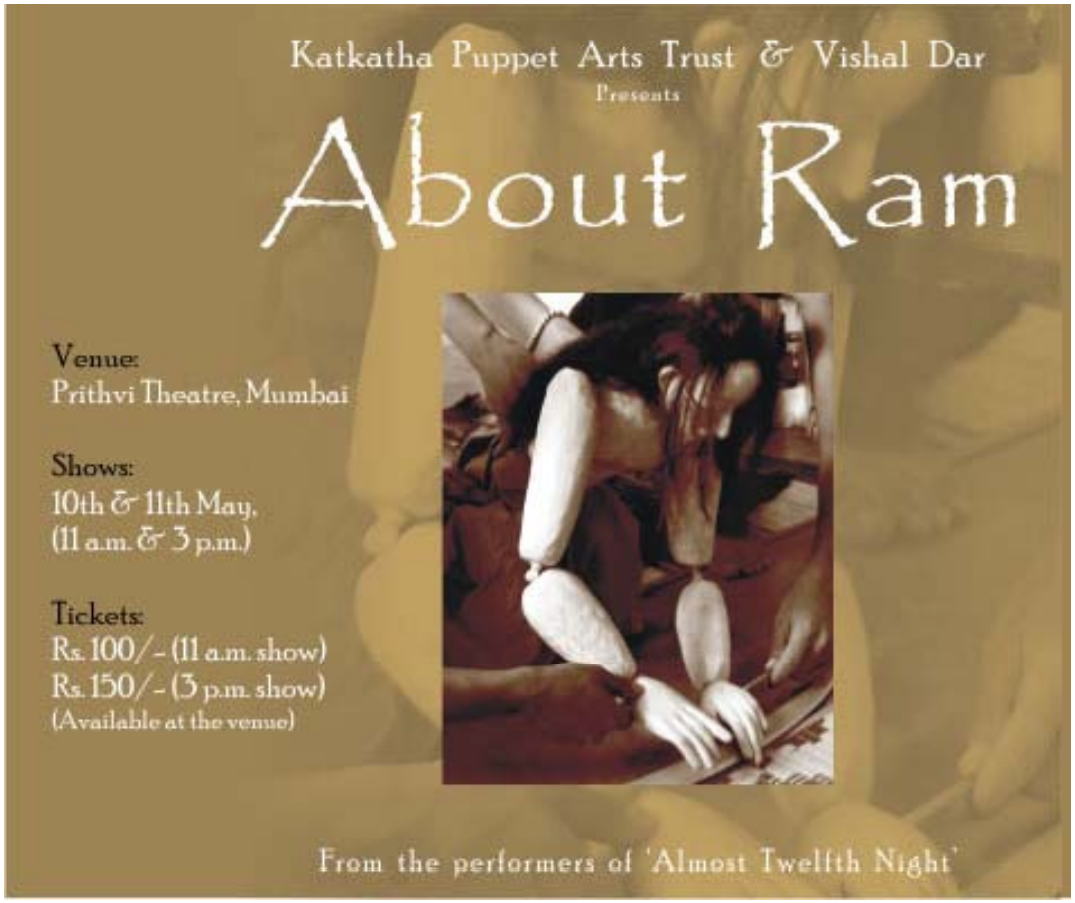
Girish Karnad:

- Has written several plays based on Sanskrit material, including Yayaati and Hayavadana.
- Has produced Utsav, based on Sudraka's 'Little Clay Cart'



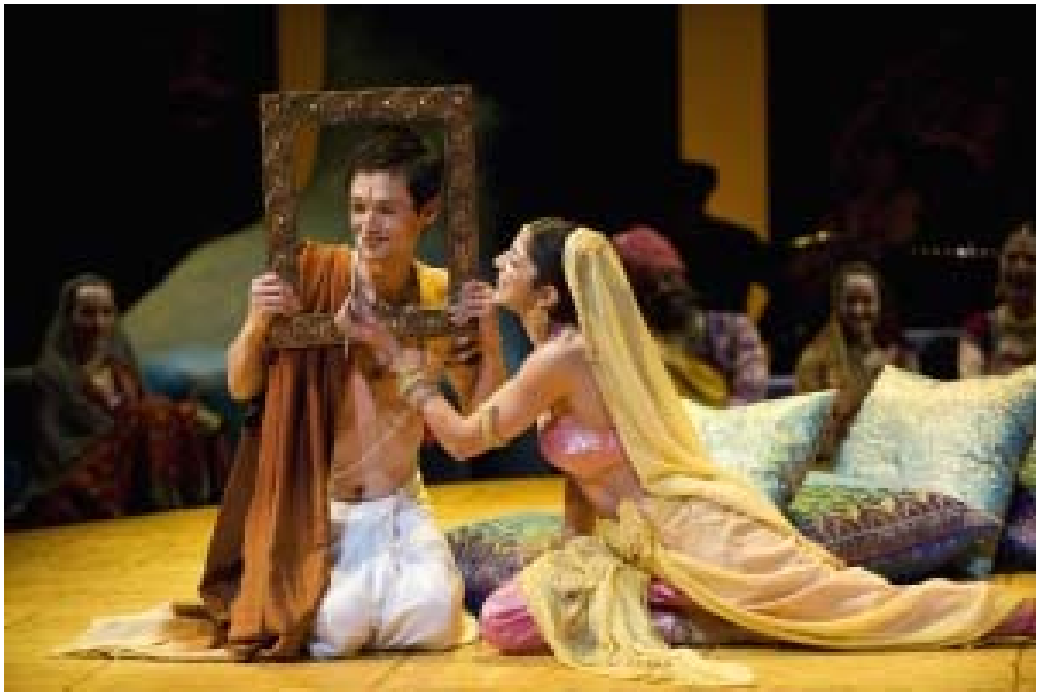
Nationally:

Anurupa Roy recently created a puppet and animation show entitled ‘About Ram’:



Internationally:

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival this year is presenting ‘The Clay Cart’:



The British Library in London is currently hosting a Ramayana exhibition based on the 17th Century Mewar manuscripts:

A week ago today, ‘Arjuna’s Dilemma’, a chamber opera based on the Bhagavad Gita by Douglas Cuomo, premiered in New York state.

Nina Paley showed her film, Sita Sings the Blues, a version of the Ramayana told from Sita's point of view, which has won several film festival awards.

A successful American banker recently started the Clay Sanskrit Library, a publishing programme designed “to introduce Classical Sanskrit literature to a wide international readership”. The books, which show the Sanskrit text alongside the English translation, are designed for the layman reader. So far, they’ve published about 40 volumes.

And finally, a joint venture between Deepak Chopra and Richard Branson, Virgin Comics, has produced a line of Sanskrit-inspired graphic novels:

- Ramayan 3392 AD
- The Tall Tales of Vishnu Sharma
- India Authentic

The *India Authentic* series were illustrated by the US-based artist, Saurav Mohapatra:

Current status in India

In India, Sanskrit is:

- taught in schools using outdated methods. Most students opt for Sanskrit for strategic reasons – to get better marks, or to gain access to the science streams above 10th standard.
- stigmatised as a tool of Hindutva
- dismissed by many as irrelevant and dull

A new image

We need to rebrand Sanskrit and recognise that:

- Sanskrit is a living language for today
- Sanskrit is part of India's cultural heritage but it need not be seen as solely Brahminical, Hindu or even Indian; its appeal transcends religious and national borders
- The incredibly rich canon of Sanskrit literature is fertile ground for contemporary artists, playwrights, authors and musicians. These texts need to be reimagined in order to stay alive.

Interest in the West

In the West, Sanskrit is still predominantly the preserve of academics and Indian diaspora communities. While Indian pop culture (Bhangra, Bollywood) has penetrated far and wide, most people have not yet heard of Sanskrit. These few examples show how popular it can be and how much interest in can generate when people are introduced to it.

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Promotion abroad

India, as a fast-developing country, has caught the world's attention for many things, from Tata's buyout of Jaguar and Landrover to Abinav Bindra's gold. The country has matured enough to offer the world cultural exports as well as software engineers and doctors. In a post-colonial world, India need no longer pander to Western cultural snobbery – it should aim to make the Mahabharata as famous as the Iliad, and to propose Valmiki as a rival to Virgil.

But before India and Indians can export Sanskrit abroad, it needs to be given a fresh lease of life at home.

And finally, for those of you who are interested in the promotion of Sanskrit, and its literature in particular, I would like to invite you to participate in and contribute to the:

Sanskrit Literature Forum

www.venetiaansell.wordpress.com